

The Emperor's Hand-Second Chapter

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Category: Star Wars

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2000-05-13 09:00:00

Updated: 2000-05-13 09:00:00

Packaged: 2016-04-27 18:10:15

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,532

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The story of Mara Jade, from her early childhood to her mission at Jabba's Palace as the Emperor's Hand.

The Emperor's Hand-Second Chapter

Nine Years before Star Wars: A New Hope

The YT-1400 freighter bucked violently for the third time since re-entry, hull plates creaking with the strain. The pilot slapped at the alarms screaming through the cockpit, letting loose a particularly vile string of Devaronian curses as a good portion of the control panel lights blinked red. "Fabulous," she said tightly. "Stabilizers gone. This'll be one doozy of a landing."

She could almost make out the spaceport against the barren sand dunes. Throwing the throttle to minimum in an attempt to slow her careening ship, she toggled the com.

"This is freighter 'Corusca Jewel'," she bit out. "Request immediate emergency landing."

"'Corusca Jewel', this is Mos Eisley Traffic Control. Clearance granted for docking bay 32."

A grim smile touched the pilot's lips as she glanced at the altimeter. The planet was rushing up to her too quickly for her liking. "Control, my stabilizers are shot. Are your docking bays equipped with tractor beams?"

There was a pause. "That's affirmative, 'Jewel'. Stand by for beam lock-on and we'll carry you in."

The pilot's eyes tightened as she watched the altimeter. Two kilometers. One and one half. One. Seven hundred meters. Six. She'd flipped on the repulsorlifts and hoped she wouldn't hit anything big when the Jewel lurched, then glided slowly to bay 32.

Tiredly, the pilot rubbed her hands over her face. She still wasn't sold on this part of the plan. The mere sight of her, a young female traveling alone in a "nearly new" freighter to the armpit of the galaxy, would have been more than enough to authenticate her identity as a smuggler "wannabe" to the denizens of Tatooine. She saw no reason for this ridiculous "emergency landing" nonsense. But, as usual, the Emperor had refused to entertain her point of view. So here she was.

Mara Jade snapped out of her reverie as the tractor beams landed her ship. Gathering her things from the cockpit and disconnecting the anti-intruder hardware, she allowed herself a wry smile. "Not," she thought dryly, "that I can't handle 'here'."

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Struggling to keep her stupid-but-trying-to-look-cunning face in place, Mara bit back a sigh of frustration. Over the past two days, she'd spent nearly four hours, off and on, at a Mos Eisley info terminal, with nothing to show for it. According to the records, there were no human males between the ages of nine and twelve anywhere on Tatooine. 'Maybe', she thought sardonically as she skimmed through the umpteenth file, 'Mommy and Daddy forgot to register little Jimmi with the--'

She broke off, her mask slipping just a tad. At the end of the file, a dot-slash had inexplicably replaced the standard dot-comma. Mara shook herself and reopened a few other files. 'It's probably just a typo', she told herself firmly, forcing down the adrenaline, but the other files contained the same discrepancy. She gave a low whistle. 'Well. The Mos Eisley data net has been the victim of a very sloppy slicer.'

(All files, in all Imperial data nets from Corellia to Coruscant, were variations on one programming "theme". The dot-comma character was the constant, throughout all the variations, that marked the end of a given file. In some systems, however, the dot-slash character could be read as a dot-comma--with one significant difference. The dot-comma could be used only at the end of a file. The dot-slash could be used anywhere in a file--the terminal would read and print onscreen only that information before the character.)

Mara grinned. 'Finally'. It was an age old slicer trick, in the 'strictly amateur' category, used to hide data you might need to access later.

The Emperor's Hand pulled up headers from all the files containing the telltale character and scanned them for location. School records, sports files, and the standard population registry, all originating from one city.

Anchorhead. *

"And you found only two children? On the whole of Tatooine?"

Mara closed her eyes, struggling to maintain contact. "Yes, my master. After I discovered the breach, I conducted a thorough search. The two children from Anchorhead are, apparently, the only two on the planet."

The Emperor furrowed his brow. "Odd. But possible, I suppose." His voice took on a far-away tone. "I will think on the matter."

Mara bowed her head. "Yes, master."

He glanced at her sharply. "In the meantime, go to Anchorhead. Investigate these two boys." An indulgent smile creased his lips. "I look forward to hearing your report." The Emperor broke contact abruptly, leaving his Hand gasping.

*

Nights on Tatooine were brutally cold--a stark contrast to the equally brutal days. With Tatoo I and II invisible below the horizon, the pale moon and ice-white stars offered only a pathetic imitation of sunshine. The idea of heat emanating from either moon or stars was laughable. Even so, the inhabitants of Tatooine's below-ground communities found ways to keep warmth flowing. Most simply used their own body heat beneath the weight of many thermal blankets, bearing stray chills with the stoic determination so characteristic of backwater farmers.

But it was not the cold that woke one such inhabitant. A young boy, perhaps ten or eleven years of age, lay alert, breathing hard and fast. He could not remember exactly what had awakened him. He knew only that there was danger somewhere above his home.

Bracing himself for the cold, he slipped from his blankets and crept, barefoot, to the sand igloo that marked the upper entrance to his dwelling. The danger was closer now; he could feel it, a dark bubble growing in his mind. He kept walking, faster, to the outer perimeter of his uncle's claim. He didn't know what would happen if he confronted the danger, only that it existed somewhere very near.

Without warning, the perimeter lights switched on and alarms began to ring. The boy barely noticed. A few seconds later, he smiled. The danger was moving away.

The smile died, however, when he heard his uncle bellow his name.

'Shavit!' he thought hurriedly. "Coming, Uncle Owen!"

*

Mara was brushing her teeth in her Anchorhead hotel room when she heard the local newscast.

"In other news, another Tusken Raider attack on a local moisture farm was thwarted last night, by a young boy. Luke Skywalker, age eleven, unknowingly tripped his uncle's perimeter alarm while taking a late night stroll, frightening away the...."

Mara stood dumbfounded. 'Luke Skywalker? He wasn't...' She mentally smacked her forehead in realization. 'Of course he wasn't listed. The other two were smokescreens.' She set her teeth. 'Maybe that slicer job wasn't as sloppy as I thought.'

Dressing quickly, she returned to the news. "Late night stroll", my

eye. No sane human would take a "late night stroll" on this planet unless he had a death wish. That kid knew perfectly well what was out there. Finding the all-important newscast again, she punched the 'More Information' button to find the location of the farm. 'A few kilometers away,' she thought. 'Not far.'

Transferring the information directly to her datapad for reference, she grabbed her macrobinocs and headed for the door.

*

The target homestead was several meters away, just visible to the naked eye. Mara lowered her binocs, considering several courses of action. She could try to sneak in, grab the kid, and sneak out. 'But what if I'm seen?' she mulled. No, she would use the direct approach--the odds for a clean escape were higher. Mara double-checked the power pack on her blaster and prepared to contact the Emperor. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of a coarse brown cloak.

It was the last thing she saw before the stun bolt took her.

*

With an effort, Mara pulled herself up from unconsciousness, to discover that she was horizontal in a small, cramped cabin. Awareness flooded back to her senses as she recalled what had happened. "Blast!" she whispered viciously, fighting back sudden tears. She had failed. Not only that: something, somehow, had stopped her.

Her master's face broke through her thoughts. "Well?" he demanded.

Mara looked at him, her face a mask of silent torture. "I failed, Your Highness," she said dully. "I was stopped."

The Emperor's rising tide of anger faltered, and he squinted at her. "Explain."

She closed her eyes against the flood waiting behind them. "I had nearly apprehended the target when I saw a brown robe. I turned to look and was hit by a stun bolt." She swallowed shakily. "I failed you."

"A brown cloak, you said?" he questioned; Mara nodded. Abruptly, he smiled. "Well, well. You think you failed me? On the contrary, Mara Jade, I would say you have performed most admirably. You may deliver your full report when you return."

Trying to hide her confusion, Mara bowed, and the Emperor broke contact.

Pushing her feelings to the back of her mind, the Emperor's Hand rose, heading for the ship's lobby.

*

End
file.